

Ivana Jardas Duvnjak, prof.<sup>1</sup>

## COLOUR IDIOMS FREQUENTLY USED IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Stručni rad / Professional paper

UDK 811.111

*People have the ability to speak in riddles, and as non-native speakers, we call these riddles - idioms. Idioms make part of the vast family of figurative expressions in language (along with metaphors, similes, proverbs, etc.). They are very well known to the native speakers, but are rather confusing for those acquiring English as the second language. Learning idioms is not easy, but once understood, it can be a lot of fun to use them especially while speaking to englishmen. On the other hand, idioms should be used carefully and only when you are sure of their meaning. The aim of this paper is to give definition of idiom as well as some examples of idioms more or less frequently used in English language to avoid ambiguities. For the purpose of this paper, I narrowed it down on idioms containing color expressions, giving the meaning, origin (in case it was attainable) and examples.*

**Key words:** idiom, Shakespearean idiom, colour idiom.

### 1. Introduction

Idioms are used a lot in English language by native speakers, sometimes as a simpler way to express a complicated idea, sometimes to be more creative in using language. They form an essential part of English vocabulary, since the language has a tendency to grow and develop as a "living organism" by expanding and changing the vocabulary over the years. One can frequently come across many commonly used idioms in conversations, books, lectures and various public media (newspapers, internet portals and TV). Unfortunately, idioms are unfairly neglected in English teaching process.<sup>2</sup>

When learning English language, at certain point one cannot avoid stumbling upon some "strange" or unusual phrases, like *It was raining cats and dogs* or *Jane bit my head off*. They tend to confuse those unfamiliar with these phrases or idioms.

Idioms cannot be translated into Croatian, or in any other language for that matter, literally, because the literal translation simply would not be logical. The first phrase *It was raining cats and dogs* does not make sense if it is translated in Croatian as *Kišili su mačke i psi*. In

<sup>1</sup> Osnovna škola Tina Ujevića, Šibenik

<sup>2</sup> Rizq, Weam Mansoor, "Teaching English Idioms to L2 Learners: ESL Teachers' Perspective" (2015), Culminating Projects in English, Paper 19, pg. 9

English it means *It was raining very heavily* (not that cats and dogs were falling from the sky). In Croatian it could be translated as *Kišilo je kao iz kabla*, a phrase widely used in everyday speech, meaning *Padala je gusta kiša* or *Pljuštalo je*. Situation with the other phrase is somewhat similar. *Jane bit my head off* means that Jane was speaking to somebody angrily without good reason (it certainly does not mean that Jane jumped to the person and beheaded them, because the person saying it is still alive). It can be translated as *Jane je bila jako ljuta na mene*, since there is not a particular phrase in Croatian language corresponding to this English idiom.

## 2. Definition, Word origin and History

An idiom is a phrase or an expression that has a figurative, or sometimes literal, meaning. Categorized as formulaic language, an idiom's figurative meaning is different from the literal meaning. There are thousands of idioms, occurring frequently in all languages. It is estimated that there are twenty-five thousand of idiomatic expressions in the English language alone.

It derives from Latin *idiomī*, "special property", from Ancient Greek: ἰδιώμα, translit. *idiōma*, "special feature, special phrasing, a peculiarity"<sup>3</sup>.

Idiom<sup>4</sup> (*noun*) is:

1. a group of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent words,<sup>5</sup>
2. a phrase whose meaning cannot be readily understood from its component parts,<sup>6</sup>
3. a traditional way of saying something that varies from language to language,<sup>7</sup>
4. a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to language,<sup>8</sup>
5. a phrase, saying or a group of words that has a metaphorical (not literal) meaning, which has become accepted in common usage.<sup>9</sup>

Many idiomatic expressions, in their original use, were not figurative, but had literal meaning. They were uttered at some point in the past to express a particular event or truth. In many occasions the events and practices, when these expressions were used, have been discontinued, and yet, the idioms remained in language as a part of figurative speech. There-

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiom>

<sup>4</sup> An idiom should not be confused with other figures of speech such as a metaphor, a form of expression (not using 'like' or 'as') in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, and in that way makes comparison (e.g., "the man of steel" or the monologue *All The World's a Stage*, from *As You Like It* by Shakespeare); a simile, a figure of speech that directly compares two things using connecting words (such as, like, as, so,...) (e.g., "faster than a speeding bullet" or "she is like a rose"); a hyperbole, an extreme exaggeration used to make a point (e.g., like "missed by a mile" or "I have a million things to do") and proverbs, which are short, popular sayings that express a truth based on common sense or practical experience (e.g., "Action speaks louder than words" or "Better late than never").

<sup>5</sup> Collins English Dictionary – Complete & Unabridged, 2004, pg. 810

<sup>6</sup> R. Fergusson, Dictionary of English Idioms, 1999, pg. viii

<sup>7</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr., Joseph F. Kett, James S. Trefil, The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Houghton Mifflin, Third Edition, 2005, pg. 59

<sup>8</sup> R. Moon, Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English: A Corpus-Based Approach, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1998, pg. 3

<sup>9</sup> [www.theidioms.com](http://www.theidioms.com)

fore, idioms have often been considered “dead” or “fixed” metaphors, i.e. expressions that were once innovative but are now conventionalized and frozen in language.<sup>10</sup>

We use the term *red tape* to denote anything that may delay or hold us up. It mainly refers to a lot of unnecessary bureaucracy or paperwork. This term originated from the fact that legal and official documents were tied up or bound with red tape since the 16th century. By doing so, it was often difficult to access them.<sup>11</sup>

How many times have we heard someone shout *Break a leg!* to someone going onstage? Certainly, you do not want someone to actually break their leg onstage. It is suggested that it is a reverse psychology of sorts. It was thought superstitiously, that by wishing somebody good luck means to tempt evil spirits or demons to do somebody harm. So, it was believed, through the ages, that wishing somebody bad fortune will bring them good luck.

We have all heard *Spill the beans*, meaning to tell a secret. It derives from the election practice in ancient Greece. Each voter would cast a vote putting a white bean (for yes) or a brown bean (for no) in a jar. It would be done secretly, so no one knew in which way somebody else has voted. However, if the jar was knocked over causing the beans to spill out, the proportion of yes and no votes could be seen. In time, such practice has been discontinued, but the idiom remained.

Idioms are frequently influenced by cultural heritage. Vocabulary and culture are often intertwined, so to understand the language it is recommended to be to a certain degree acquainted to the target culture. The same idiom would have different meaning to different nationalities. For example, to English people *the black cat* usually means “good luck”, but to the American or Croatian people it would mean quite the opposite - “bad luck”. Furthermore, idioms sometimes bear rather strong meaning, so one must be careful when using them not to be misunderstood or, even worse, offensive.

## 2.1. Shakespearean idioms

Many idioms existing in English language were coined by writers and used in their literary works, thus introducing them to the language. Eventually they have been widely accepted by readers and have been used in everyday communication. At the beginning, idioms were mostly used literary, but in time they gradually assumed figurative meaning.

The following idioms were invented by William Shakespeare<sup>12</sup> or popularized by him and used in his famous plays, although considered by English speakers as common expressions and clichés:

- Lie low – keep out of sight (from *Much Ado About Nothing*);

<sup>10</sup> C. Cacciari, P. Tabossi, *Idioms: Processing, Structure and Interpretation*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993, pg. xii

<sup>11</sup> <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Common-Idioms-and-Phrases-Meanings-and-Origins>

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was an English poet, playwright and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. Often referred to as England's national poet and the “Bard of Avon”, he was the author of 37 plays (histories, tragedies, comedies and romances), 154 sonnets and 4 poems. His literary works have been translated into every major living language, and his plays are performed onstage more often than those of any other playwright.

- Good riddance – to be pleased that something or someone is gone (from *Troilus and Cressida*);
- Green-eyed monster – jealousy (from *Othello*);
- Heart of gold – very kind and generous (from *Henry V*);
- It's Greek to me – to have absolutely no idea what is going on (from *Julius Caesar*);
- Night owl – a person active late at night (from *Richard II* and *Twelfth Night*);
- Seen better days – been more wealthy or in better shape in the past (from *As You Like It* and *Timon of Athens*);
- A charmed life – a life that seems to have been protected from harm by some kind of spell or magic, to have a lot of good luck (from *Macbeth*);
- Send him packing – tell someone to go away, especially if you are annoyed by them (from *Henry IV*);
- Wild goose chase – a hopeless quest (from *Romeo and Juliet*).

Idioms mentioned above are only some of the examples of Shakespearean idioms in English language.

### 3. "Color Idioms"<sup>13</sup>

We are surrounded by a very colorful world, so it is quite understandable that colors found their place in many idiomatic expressions. These idioms are of both, artistic and popular origin, and are, more or less, widely used in English language by native speakers and are often heard in movies and TV. As non-native speakers we have heard and read them many times and that is the reason why my focus was concentrated on this category of idioms.

#### 3.1. White

- (As) white as a sheet / ghost – extremely pale in the face, because of fear, illness or shock (e.g. *Did something scare you? You are white as a sheet/ghost!*);
- a white Christmas – a Christmas when it snows (e.g. *Last winter there wasn't any snow. I hope this year we'll have a white Christmas.*);
- a white elephant – a useless, but very expensive thing or possession [The kings of Siam, now Thailand, would give as a present a white elephant – a rare, highly regarded animal – to those who were not in their favour any more, knowing that the cost of keeping it would ruin them financially.] (e.g. *Grandma's ornate silver is a white elephant, nobody wants it and it is too valuable to throw away.*);
- (to show) the white flag – to surrender [From the military custom, when the enemy used the white flag in order to communicate peacefully or surrender.] (e.g. *After a long debate they were forced to show the white flag. The other team had better arguments.*);

---

<sup>13</sup> In my search for idioms with colours I used Oxford Idioms Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2002, pgs. 28, 29, 32, 144, 147, 148, 285, 314, 315, 354, 444, 457 and Fergusson, R., The Cassell Dictionary of English Idioms, Cassell, 1999, pgs. 25, 28, 141, 144, 145, 252, 274, 275, 309, 381.

- a white hope – a member of a team expected to achieve much [From the sport of boxing when a Caucasian fighter is thought to be capable of defeating the African American champion.] (e.g. *John is young, energetic and full of ideas. He is the white hope of this company.*);
- a white lie – a small or harmless lie said in order not to hurt somebody, diplomatic untruth (e.g. *She asked me if I liked her new dress and I told her a white lie. It was really ugly.*).

### 3.2. Yellow

- A yellow streak – cowardice, a quality of being easily frightened (e.g. *He never wanted to fight. I always knew he had a yellow streak in him.*).

### 3.3. Pink

- (To be) in the pink – (to be) in very good health and excellent physical condition (e.g. *The horse that won the race is in the pink of condition.*);
- (to see) pink elephants – (to) hallucinate because of being intoxicated by alcohol (e.g. *He should stop drinking whiskey for tonight, or he will be seeing pink elephants.*);
- (to be) tickled pink (to death) – to be very pleased or amused (e.g. *My grandma will be tickled pink to get the invitation to your birthday.*);
- (to have) a pink / blue fit – to be very angry (e.g. *If your mother catches you smoking, she'll have a pink fit.*).

### 3.4. Red

- (As) red as a beetroot – very red in the face, because you feel angry, embarrassed or hot (e.g. *I could feel I was going as red as a beetroot when I got an F in English test.*);
- in the red – in debt [From the use of the red ink on the debit side of an account to show the amount that was owed.] (e.g. *We are usually in the red after the Christmas and New Year's celebration.*);
- (not to have) a red cent – have no money at all (e.g. *I wish I could go to Hawaii, but I don't have a red cent at the moment.*);
- (on) red alert – prepared for an emergency or something dangerous to happen (e.g. *Hospitals are on red alert after the explosion at the center of the town.*);
- red carpet – an impressive welcome given to an important visitor [From the strip of a red carpet laid on the ground for a celebrity or important person to walk on.] (e.g. *When I went for the first time to my boyfriend's house, his family put out the red carpet for me.*);
- a red herring – something which diverts attention from the main point, taking attention away from the real issue [From the custom of using the scent of the smoked, red herring to train the hunting dogs.] (e.g. *The news about our sports achievements in basketball is just a red herring. The real problem is the economic situation in our country.*);

- (like) a red rag to the bull – certain to make someone very angry or violent [From the common misconception that bulls don't like the color red.] (e.g. *Don't mention anything about religion to my grandad. It's like a red rag to the bull.*);
- red tape – complicated official rules that prevent things from being done [From the red ribbon or tape used in the past to tie up official documents.] (e.g. *It's unbelievable how much red tape you have to go through if you want to start your own business!*);
- (to) paint the town red – to visit different clubs and bars and have a wonderful time (e.g. *It was the end of semester and students decided to go out and paint the town red.*);
- (to) see red – to become very angry (e.g. *Cruelty to animals makes me see red.*).

### 3.5. Green

- (To) give somebody/get the green light – to give somebody permission to do something/to be allowed to go ahead with the project [From the green light on traffic lights, which means 'go'] (e.g. *We are waiting for the boss to give us the green light to start with the project.*);
- green as grass – inexperienced, naive (e.g. *I was green as grass, fresh from school, when I started working for my present employers.*);
- green fingers/thumb – skill in gardening (e.g. *Your flowers in the garden are beautiful. You really have green fingers.*);
- green with envy – jealous [From the old belief that greenish color of one's face indicate jealousy] (e.g. *She was green with envy when she saw her new Louboutin shoes.*);
- the green-eyed monster – jealousy [From Shakespeare's play *Othello*; "O! beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on." (Act III, scene III)] (e.g. *Jack was bitten by the green eyed monster when she saw his girlfriend talking to David.*).

### 3.6. Blue

- Between the devil and the deep blue sea – when one has to choose between two equally bad alternatives (e.g. *In tough situations like this, you find yourself caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.*);
- blue blood – an individual of noble origin, an aristocrat; a member of "high society" [From the Spanish idiom *sangre azul*, used in Spain for people with high status whose blood was considered pure, translated into English at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] (e.g. *The new student is very arrogant because he is a blue blood.*);
- blue-eyed boy/girl – someone particularly favoured by an authority (e.g. *Jane is manager's blue-eyed girl, she will probably be promoted very soon.*);
- black and blue – covered with bruises (e.g. *I was all black and blue after the car accident.*);
- to be in blue/to look blue/to feel blue – to be depressed, to be very sad; to look scared (e.g. *He feels blue after his girlfriend left him.*);

- a bolt from the blue /out of the blue – a sudden and unexpected event/unexpectedly, all of a sudden (e.g. *She had given no warning that she is leaving, it came as a bolt from the blue.*);
- (the) boys in blue – police officers (e.g. *If you are not careful, you will get a visit from the boys in blue.*);
- once in a blue moon – very rarely, almost never [From the very rare phenomenon when the full moon rises twice in a month] (e.g. *Christmas bonuses in our company are given once in a blue moon.*);
- until one's face is blue – for a very long time and without success (e.g. *You can argue with the boss until you are blue in the face, he will never agree with you.*);
- (to) scream blue murder – to protest loudly and for a long time (e.g. *If you get promoted and she doesn't, she will scream blue murder.*).

### 3.7. Grey (BrE), gray (AmE)

- A grey area/shades of grey – an area of a subject difficult to define, an issue/situation that is not clear-cut (e.g. *People should avoid getting involved in business deals that have different shades of grey.*);
- grey matter – intellect, intelligence or mental power, brain [Hercule Poirot, a literary character invented by Agatha Christie, always mentions the importance of his "little grey cells" when solving crimes] (e.g. *Jake hasn't got much grey matter, but he is a hard worker.*);
- (men in) grey suits – influential people (politicians, lawyers, etc.), but not always well-known to the public (e.g. *Many important decisions are made by the men in grey suits.*).

### 3.8. Black

- Black and/or white – absolutely good or bad, right or wrong (e.g. *You see everything in black and white.*);
- in black and white – in writing or print (e.g. *It's written in black and white that stealing is not allowed.*);
- a black day (for somebody) – a sad/disastrous day, a day when something unfortunate happens (e.g. *It was a black day for everybody in this area when the factory was shut down.*);
- a black eye – a dark circle/bruise around the eye caused by being hit (e.g. *I fought with my friend yesterday and got the black eye.*);
- a black look – an angry expression on somebody's face (e.g. *My wife gave me a black look when I suggested she should spend less money on her clothes.*);
- the black market – an illegal form of trade in which illegal substances (drugs) or things difficult to obtain are sold and bought (e.g. *Tickets for the concert are being sold on the black market for \$100.*);
- a/the black sheep (of the family) – a person considered bad/a failure by members of his/her family [Shepherds disliked black sheep in their flocks because the black wool



was less valued than the white wool] (e.g. *He was considered a black sheep of the family after having left home at sixteen to travel abroad.*);

- a black spot – a dangerous area, usually on a road, where accidents often happen (e.g. *This junction is a well-known black spot since it was built.*);
- not as black as one is painted – better than one's reputation, not as bad as people say (e.g. *Our principle is not as black as she is painted, in fact she is quite friendly.*).

### 3.9. Silver

- (To hand something) on a silver platter – give/do something to somebody without expecting a favour in return (e.g. *New generations expect to be handed everything on a silver platter. They put no effort into their work.*);
- the silver screen – the film industry (e.g. *Marilyn Monroe was one of the greatest stars of the silver screen.*);
- (to be) born with a silver spoon in one's mouth – (to be) born into rich family (e.g. *He never had to worry about money since he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.*);
- every cloud has a silver lining. (saying) – something good will always come of a difficult or unhappy situation;
- a silver tongue – to talk in a pleasant way in order to make someone do what you want (e.g. *It was his silver tongue that got him the job.*).

### 3.10. Gold / golden

- All that glitters/glisters is not gold. (saying) – not everything is good or attractive as much as it seems to be [used by Shakespeare in *The merchant of Venice*];
- a gold mine – an activity that makes a large profit (e.g. *That café of theirs is a real gold mine.*);
- (as) good as gold – (of children) very well behaved (e.g. *The children were as good as gold. They were playing nicely with each other the whole afternoon.*);
- a heart of gold – a kind and helpful nature (e.g. *He has got a heart of gold even though he is sometimes bad-tempered.*);
- (to be) worth one's weight in gold – to be very useful or valuable (e.g. *A reliable car is worth its weight in gold.*);
- like gold dust – very rare and difficult to obtain (e.g. *These new sneakers are like gold dust. You can't get them anywhere.*);
- the streets are paved with gold. (saying) – a place where it seems easy to make money (e.g. *More and more people are moving to the western European countries believing that their streets are paved with gold.*);
- to strike gold – to find exactly what one needs (e.g. *She hasn't always been lucky with finding the job but I think that she struck gold this time.*);
- the golden age/era – a very successful period in the past (e.g. *The period between 1920 and 1960 is considered to be the golden era of Hollywood.*);



- a golden boy/girl – a popular and successful person in particular field (e.g. *Wayne Gretzky was a golden boy of ice-hockey.*);
- a golden handshake – a large sum of money given to an employee when they leave their job (on retirement or redundancy) (e.g. *After leaving his last job he was given a large golden handshake.*);
- the golden rule – the most important rule or principle to remember when one is doing something (e.g. *Always keep an eye on your opponent. It is the golden rule.*);
- Silence is golden. (saying) – it is best sometimes not to say something in an awkward or dangerous situation [The complete saying is “*Speech is silver, silence is golden.*”].

#### 4. Conclusion

The correct usage of idioms, in both formal and informal communication, probably represents the highest level of language acquisition. When speaking native language, we are not aware most of the times how often idiomatic expressions are used in everyday communication. Idioms allow us to be creative in language, to express ourselves in an almost poetic way instead of being simple and blunt. By using idioms we can impress someone professionally as well as privately, but we must always be aware of the fact that they should be used correctly and carefully to avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings. Therefore it is necessary to emphasize the importance of idioms because they are essential for successful communication. The more idioms students learn and use correctly, the more will they sound native-like, and in that way improve their language proficiency. By learning idiomatic expressions, students also become aware of cultural differences, but also similarities between countries and nations.

#### LITERATURE

1. Cacciari, C., Tabossi, P., Idioms: Processing, Structure and Interpretation, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993
2. E. D. Hirsch Jr., Joseph F. Kett, James S. Trefil, The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Houghton Mifflin, Third Edition, 2005
3. Fergusson, R., The Cassell Dictionary of English Idioms, Cassell, 1999
4. Moore, R., Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English: A Corpus-Based Approach, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1998
5. Rizq, Weam Mansoor, “Teaching English Idioms to L2 Learners: ESL Teachers’ Perspective”, Culminating Projects in English, Paper 19, 2015
6. Collins English Dictionary-Complete & Unabridged, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
7. Oxford Idioms Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2002.
8. The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare, Chancellor Press, 2001
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiom>
10. <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Common-Idioms-and-Phrases-Meanings-and-Origins>
11. [www.theidioms.com](http://www.theidioms.com)

*Sažetak*

**IDIOMI S BOJAMA ČESTO KORIŠTENI U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU**

*Ljudi imaju sposobnost govoriti u zagonetkama, a kao neizvorni govornici te zagonetke nazivamo idiomima. Idiomi su dio velike grupe figurativnih izraza u jeziku (zajedno s metaforama, poredbama, poslovicama, itd.). Jako su dobro poznati izvornim govornicima, ali su prilično zbunjujući onima koji su usvojili engleski jezik kao drugi jezik. Učenje idioma nije lako, ali kada ih jednom shvatimo njihova upotreba u jeziku može biti "zabavna" pogotovo u razgovoru s englezima. S druge strane, potrebno ih je koristiti oprezno i samo onda kada smo sigurni u njihovo značenje. Namjera ovog rada je dati definiciju idioma, kao i neke primjere više ili manje često korištene u engleskom jeziku kako bi se izbjegla dvosmislenost. U ovom radu ograničila sam se na idiome koji sadrže boje, dajući značenje, porjeklo (ukoliko je bilo dostupno) i primjere.*

**Ključne riječi:** *idiom, Shakesperianski idiom, idiom s bojama.*